



Illinois Historic Preservation Agency

313 South Sixth Street
Springfield, Illinois 62701
www.illinoishistory.gov

Lincoln's Service in the Black Hawk War

Christian J. Vanhooser
Good Shepherd Lutheran School, Collinsville
Teacher: Michael Voss

Abraham Lincoln is well known in America and around the world, but few are aware that he served in a war. Abraham Lincoln served as a Captain in the Thirty-first Regiment of Militia of Sangamon County, First Division during the Black Hawk war in northern Illinois.

The Black Hawk War was a war fought against the Sauk, Fox, and Kickapoo tribes. On April 5, 1832, a group of roughly a thousand Indian men, women, and children crossed the Mississippi River into Illinois near the mouth of the Iowa River. The leader of this band was Black Hawk, a sixty-five year old Sauk warrior. They were attempting to return to their homelands, unable to comprehend land treaties that restricted them from their former homes, cities, and lands. The Indians did not seek a war, but wanted only to live in freedom and peace on their former land.

Lincoln joined the militia with several friends from New Salem and Clary's Grove and formed a mounted infantry company. The volunteers met at the farm of Dallas Scott in April, 1832. Lincoln and William Kirkpatrick, a local sawmill owner were nominated for captain of the company. When Lincoln and Kirkpatrick stood in front of the men, two thirds of them got behind Lincoln, casting their votes for him.

Lincoln was inexperienced as a military leader, but he still attempted to keep order and discipline in the group of rowdy men. He did not hesitate to threaten physical force to keep order. One story tells of an old Indian who happened to wander into the

men's camp. When the men wanted to kill the Indian as a spy, Lincoln stood up in front of the men and challenged anyone who hurt the innocent Indian to a fight. The men then let the Indian slip away.

Most important about Lincoln's experience in the Black Hawk War was that he gained tactical knowledge and became acquainted with military life. Lincoln's company never saw battle in the Black Hawk War. Later, when talking about the war, Lincoln said, "I had a good many bloody struggles with the mosquitoes, and ... I can truly say I was often very hungry."

Although his rank as captain was something Lincoln was said to have been very proud of, he was discharged from his command on May 27. He re-enlisted in Captain Elijah Iles' company as a private, and afterward served as a private in Captain Jacob Earley's company from June 16 to July 10. When Lincoln was asked why he continued to re-enlist he said, "I was out of work and there was no danger of more fighting; I could do nothing better than enlist again."

Many people claim that Lincoln was a capable leader during the Black Hawk War, but some sources regard Lincoln as incompetent and ridiculed him. Certain members of his own company regarded him as a joke or absurdity, but never in malice. Many of the members of his company had "serious doubts about his courage." Some later confessed that they had elected Lincoln over Kirkpatrick merely because they would be able to do what they wanted under Lincoln. Despite these descriptions, Lincoln later described his military service as valuable.

The end of the Black Hawk War came in the Battle of Bad Axe when Black Hawk and his group of Indians attempted to cross the Mississippi River. In what some would

call a “slaughter” the troops killed many of the Native American men, women, and children as they emerged from the river on the other side, nearly eliminating the Sauk tribe. Lincoln returned home to New Salem after the war, on foot, because his horse had been stolen.

Lincoln learned valuable leadership and military skills that would later serve him well in the presidency, which was almost completely a wartime presidency. [From Robert P. Howard, *Illinois A History of the Prairie State*; Illinois State History Military Museum; *Captain Abraham Lincoln* <http://www.il.ngb.army.mil/Museum/HistPeople/Lincoln.htm> (Sept. 29, 2008); James Lewis, *The Black Hawk War of 1812*, <http://lincoln.lib.niu.edu/blackhawk/scholarshipindex.html> (Sept. 29, 2008); and Wisconsin Historical Society; *Abraham Lincoln in the Black Hawk War*, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/diary/002725.asp>.]